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ABSTRACT

Although tutoring can be very helpful to disadvantaged students, as can preschool experiences, neither of them is fundamental. The fundamental job consists of a basic change in the character of the school system itself from a middle-class situation to a more representative one, and intensive teacher training programs aimed toward building teacher respect for disadvantaged children and their families. Because the school system is failing these students, the tutor becomes very important. To help the student, the tutor must know something about the culture of the low-income person and the students' way of learning. Most of these students benefit tremendously if they can learn by seeing, touching, feeling, and doing. A teacher's style is also important, and these students seem to be most attracted to "informal authority." A tutor can greatly help the disadvantaged student by teaching him/her some of the "know-hows" of the school: how to take tests, how to listen, how to study. There are many types of teaching technology that may have special value for low-income students including the use of "hip" language in formal lessons. This can be done, for example, by presenting poems using the language or compiling dictionaries of "hip" words. Another aspect is the whole area of students helping each other. Our schools are certainly not perfect, and these disadvantaged students can contribute an enormous amount toward helping us change them. (PB)

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TUTORING THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD*

Dr. Frank Riessman**

ITEM NO. 706
FOR INSPECTION ONLY

INTRODUCTION

Before I discuss tutoring, I have a simple message relating to it that I would like to put before you:

I think you can do a tremendous amount in tutoring disadvantaged youngsters by way of opening up their interests, making a real connection with them, and helping them to make a meaningful connection to school. But I do not think tutoring is a fundamental approach to the education of the disadvantaged child. Two myths have appeared on the American scene; two approaches seem to be developing for the education of the disadvantaged: the pre-school and the remedial. I am entirely in favor of pre-school education and remedial education, but I do not think that either of them is fundamental, and we get lost if we make them the central issues.

The combination of these two appraoches seems to imply the following: "Children from low income homes have a terrible background and they cannot easily get along in the schools. Let us get them very early and prepare them so that we do not have to change the schools very much. We can keep the schools as they are and prepare the youngsters at an early age so they can be attuned to the school and its culture. If we fail, let us remedy the situation with remedial techniques at a later point."

I submit this is the wrong basic lines because the fundamental job has to be done in the school itself, not in extra-school experiences and not in pre-school experiences.

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* Presented at the Tutor Orientation Symposium, October 17, 1964, under the auspices of the Office of Tutoring Services and Georgetown University.

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Change Needed in the Schools

At the center of what needs to be done, it seems to me, are the following:

1. A basic change needs to be made in the character of the school system itself, by bringing into the school the indigenous low income non-professionals as teacher aides, as assistants in the classroom, etc. These people would also help in changing the whole character of the system from a top heavy middle class kind of situation to a more representative one.

2. There is a need for an intensive teacher training program aimed toward building teacher respect for disadvantaged children and their families. An example of a highly successful program of effective teaching of the disadvantaged is Samuel Sheppard's in the Kennaker School District in St. Louis. His teachers have not only been much more contented themselves, and have not dropped out of the "slum"schools. There are waiting lists of teachers who want to come into Dr. Sheppard's school system!

The Tutor's Role

Having said this, I shall now try to put tutoring in its proper context. At the present time the school system has failed the disadvantaged child because it has not understood this child: his type, his culture, his strengths. The school has emphasized his deprivations, his weaknesses, his limits. And in placing the emphasis on his deficits it has emphasized the wrong deficits. I don't think it is linguistic ability, or any of the cognitive defects that are usually assumed.

In the context of the assumption that the school system is failing these youngsters, the tutor becomes enormously important.

I am reminded here of the study conducted at the Bank Street College of Education. Fifty people, school personnel, were brought together from all over the country to work with highly disad-

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vantaged emotionally disturbed children, as measured by a series of criteria. The main criterion was that the children were in the "600" schools for disturbed children in New York City. These youngsters were doing very poorly in schools, were low achievers, and were having lots of trouble. What happened to these youngsters during the one month project? For one hour in the morning, one teacher worked with one child in a tutoring context. The child felt tremendously rewarded by having his own teacher, having one person concerned with him, with whom he could really "level" and possibly identify to some extent. (I am not suggesting this happened in each case.)

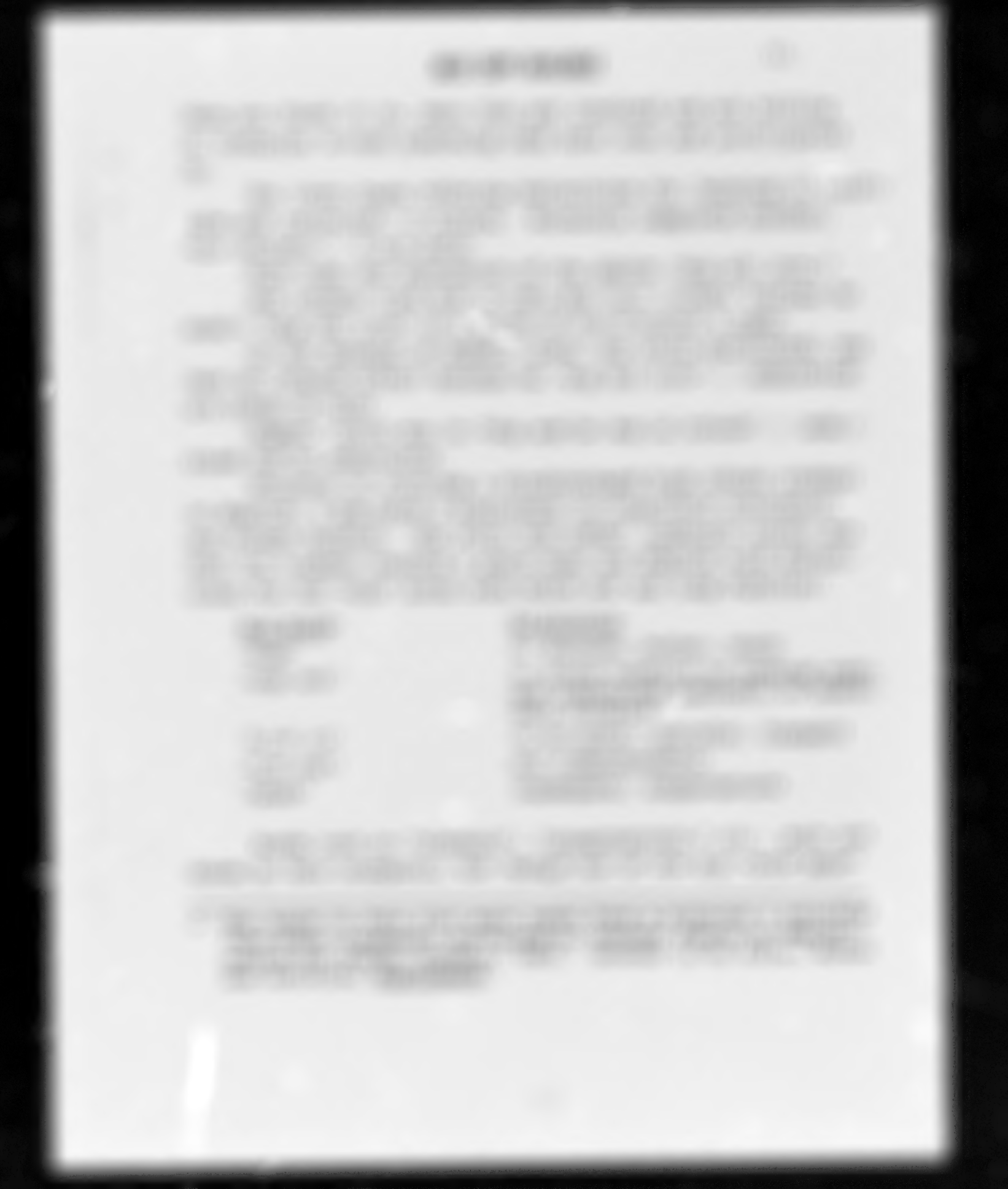
Apparently a great deal of improvement occured not only in the academic work of these youngsters but in their behavior problems as well in the following year. Most of the follow-up analysis of the project seems to indicate that the most important thing that happened in the experiment was the one hour one-to-one situation.

What the Tutor Needs to Know

It is extremely important for the tutor to aim high -- aim for a real connection to the child or youngster. A strong effort should be made to find things that catch his interest, and relate his interests to the school world which is quite alien to him.

In order to help the youngster there are two general areas that the tutor has to know something about: One is the culture of the low income person and the other is the cognitive style, or way of learning, of these youngsters.

Low Income Culture: People working with these youngsters, whether they be tutors, teachers, or guidance counselors, need to become interested in low income culture, not only through reading anthropological material but through artistic material -- reading novels, seeing movies, making comparisons with other low income



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she quickly became familiar with them and derived great pleasure from a new found use of various "big" words.

Another dimension to consider is the whole concept of the youngsters teaching others. We have lots of direct evidence now that people in helping others very often are much more helped themselves.

In Albany, New York, a woman by the name of Schneider, asked youngsters who had difficulty in reading to read terribly simple material to very small children. In fact, she used role-playing by asking them to anticipate reading to small children and read to her. She found that in doing this their reading improved tremendously. Incidentally, I think this has a great deal of meaning for the entire integration movement. You hear a great deal of talk about what is going to happen when the white middle-class more advanced youngsters get together with the Negro youngsters coming from the segregated schools, who are behind in learning. You also hear that this is one of the great sacrifices that the white children are going to put up with as they help the Negro children and hold themselves back while the Negro children catch up. This view overlooks one great possibility that we haven't really utilized: the giver of this help, in this case, the more advanced child, may learn a great deal from the experience of teaching. It is a form of learning that is particularly useful for certain children. This principle can be used very profitably in all situations in which you group children of different levels.

I have one final closing comment to make that may provide some backdrop for all that has been said. If you look at the field of education in the United States today, you see constant criticism of the school system, the curriculum, the teachers, the administration. The conformity of the system, the lack of real learning, etc., are constantly attacked. Paul Goodman, Edward Friedenberg, and many others have plenty of criticisms of schools and teachers. In a similar vein, there is constant

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powerful criticism of the middle-class in our country. I call this the Erich Fromm motif. It has been more recently taken over by Paul Goodman. This is the penetrating, deep, critical evaluation of our society, and of middle-class people in particular, as conformists who have lost their spontaneity, their inner convictions. This criticism is very widespread. But there is one place where it barely arises, and this is when the teaching of disadvantaged children is discussed. The disadvantaged children apparently are to be made into these middle-class people by the school culture; they are to be made to adapt to the oft-criticized school. Suddenly when we talk about these youngsters, we have much more idealized pictures of the school and the middle-class life these youngsters are to be prepared for. Suddenly these children are to be made to adjust, to conform to our wonderful ways, forgetting how critical we have been. I agree with the David Riesmans, Paul Goodmans, and Erich Fromms and many of school critics that a great deal has to be done in changing the middle-class and the school. Very seriously, I feel that these disadvantaged youngsters, with their culture and their style and their positives, can contribute an enormous amount toward helping us change the middle class, and school system and the society.*

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*See John Oliver Killens, "Explanation of the 'Black Psyche'" New York Times magazine section 6, June 7, 1964, p. 37 for an excellent discussion of the Negro contributions to "our age".